HARBARTHSLJOTH

The Poem of Harbarth

INTRODUCTORY NOTE

The Harbarthsljoth is found complete in the *Codex Regius*, where it follows the *Skirnismol*, and from the fourth line of stan{z}a 19 to the end of the poem in the *Arnamagnæan Codex*, of which it occupies the first page and a half.

The poem differs sharply from those which precede it in the *Codex Regius*, both in metrical form and in spirit. It is, indeed, the most nearly formless of all the Eddic poems. The normal metre is the Malahattr (cf. Introduction, where an example is given). The name of this verse-form means "in the manner of conversation," and the Harbarthsljoth's verse fully justifies the term. The Atli poems exemplify the conventional use of Malahattr, but in the Harbarthsljoth the form is used with extraordinary freedom, and other metrical forms are frequently employed. A few of the speeches of which the poem is composed cannot be twisted into any known Old Norse metre, and appear to be simply prose.

How far this confusion is due to interpolations and faulty transmission of the original poem is uncertain. Finnur Jonsson has attempted a wholesale purification of the poem, but his arbitrary condemnation of words, lines, and entire stanzas as spurious is quite unjustified by any positive evidence. I have accepted Mogk's theory that the author was "a first-rate psychologist, but a poor poet," and have translated the poem as it stands in the manuscripts. I have preserved the metrical confusion of the original by keeping throughout so far as possible to the metres found in the poem; if the rhythm of the translation is often hard to catch, the difficulty is no less with the original Norse.

The poem is simply a contest of abuse, such as the early Norwegian and Icelander delighted in, the opposing figures being Thor and Othin, the latter appearing in the disguise of the ferryman Harbarth. Such billingsgate lent itself readily to changes, interpolations and omissions, and it is little wonder that the poem is chaotic. It consists mainly of boasting and of references, often luckily obscure, to disreputable events in the life of one or the other of the disputants. Some editors have sought to read a complex symbolism into it, particularly by representing

{p. 122}

it as a contest between the noble or warrior class (Othin) and the peasant (Thor). But it seems a pity to take such a vigorous piece of broad farce too seriously.

Verse-form, substance, and certain linguistic peculiarities, notably the suffixed articles, point to a relatively late date (eleventh century) for the poem in its present form.

Probably it had its origin in the early days, but its colloquial nature and its vulgarity made it readily susceptible to changes.

Owing to the chaotic state of the text, and the fact that none of the editors or commentators have succeeded in improving it much, I have not in this case attempted to give all the important emendations and suggestions. The stanza-divisions are largely arbitrary.

Thor was on his way back from a journey in the East, and came to a sound; on the other side of the sound was a ferryman with a boat. Thor called out:

1. "Who is the fellow yonder, | on the farther shore of the sound?"

[*Prose*. *Harbarth* ("Gray-Beard"): Othin. On the nature of the prose notes found in the manuscripts, cf. *Grimnismol*, introduction. *Thor*: the journeys of the thunder-god were almost as numerous as those of Othin; cf. *Thrymskvitha* and *Hymiskvitha*. Like the Robin Hood of the British ballads, Thor was often temporarily worsted, but always managed to come out ahead in the end. His "Journey in the East" is presumably the famous episode, related in full by Snorri, in the course of which he en countered the giant Skrymir, and in the house of Utgartha-Loki lifted the cat which turned out to be Mithgarthsorm. The *Hymiskvitha* relates a further incident of this journey.]

{p. 123}

The ferryman spake:
2. "What kind of a peasant is yon, | that calls o'er the bay?"

Thor spake:
3. "Ferry me over the sound; | I will feed thee therefor in the morning;
A basket I have on my back, | and food therein, none better;
At leisure I ate, | ere the house I left,
Of herrings and porridge, | so plenty I had."

The ferryman spake:
4. "Of thy morning feats art thou proud, | but the future thou knowest not wholly;
Doleful thine home-coming is: | thy mother, me thinks, is dead."

Thor spake:
5. "Now hast thou said | what to each must seem
The mightiest grief, | that my mother is dead."

[2. The superscriptions to the speeches are badly confused in the manuscripts, but editors have agreed fairly well as to where they belong. 3. From the fact that in *Regius* line 3 begins with a capital letter, it is possible that lines 3-4 constitute the ferryman's reply, with something lost before stanza 4.

4. *Thy mother*: Jorth (Earth).

5. Some editors assume a lacuna after this stanza.

6. *Three good dwellings*: this has been generally assumed to mean three separate establishments, but it may refer simply to {footnote p. 124} the three parts of a single farm, the dwelling proper, the cattle barn and the storehouse; i.e., Thor is not even a respectable peasant.]

{p. 124}

The ferryman spake:
6. "Three good dwellings, | methinks, thou hast not;
Barefoot thou standest, | and wearest a beggar's dress;
Not even hose dost thou have."

Thor spake:
7. "Steer thou hither the boat; | the landing here shall I show thee;
But whose the craft | that thou keepest on the shore?"

The ferryman spake:
8. "Hildolf is he | who bade me have it,
A hero wise; | his home is at Rathsey's sound.
He bade me no robbers to steer, | nor stealers of steeds,
But worthy men, | and those whom well do I know.
Say now thy name, | if over the sound thou wilt fare."

Thor spake:
9. "My name indeed shall I tell, | though in danger I am,

[9. *Hildolf* ("slaughtering wolf"): not elsewhere mentioned in the *Edda*. *Rathsey* ("Isle of Counsel"): likewise not mentioned elsewhere.

9. *In danger*: Thor is "sekr," i.e., without the protection of any law, so long as he is in the territory of his enemies, the {footnote p. 125} giants. *Meili*: a practically unknown son of Othin, mentioned here only in the *Edda*. *Magni*: son of Thor and the giantess Jarnsaxa; after Thor's fight with Hrungnir (cf. stanza 14, note) Magni, though but three days old, was the only one of the gods strong enough to lift the dead giant's foot from Thor's neck. After rescuing his father, Magni said to him: "There would have been little trouble, father, had I but come sooner; I think I should have sent this giant to hell with my fist if I had met him first." Magni and his brother, Mothi, inherit Thor's hammer.]

{p. 126}

And all my race; | I am Othin's son,
Meili's brother, | and Magni's father,
The strong one of the gods; | with Thor now speech canst thou get.
And now would I know | what name thou hast."

The ferryman spake:
10. "Harbarth am I, | and seldom I hide my name."

Thor spake:
11. "Why shouldst thou hide thy name, | if quarrel thou hast not?"

Harbarth spake:
12. "And though I had a quarrel, | from such as thou art
Yet none the less | my life would I guard,
Unless I be doomed to die."

[12. This stanza is hopelessly confused as to form, but none of the editorial rearrangements have materially altered the meaning. *Doomed to die*: the word "feigr" occurs constantly in the Old Norse poems and sagas; the idea of an inevitable but unknown fate seems to have been practically universal through out the pre-Christian period. On the concealment of names from enemies, cf. *Fafnismol*, prose after stanza 1.]

Thor spake:
13. "Great trouble, methinks, | would it be to come to thee,
To wade the waters across, | and wet my middle;
Weakling, well shall I pay | thy mocking words,
if across the sound I come."

Harbarth spake:
14. "Here shall I stand | and await thee here;
Thou hast found since Hrungnir died | no fiercer man."

Thor spake:
15. "Fain art thou to tell | how with Hrungnir I fought,
The haughty giant, | whose head of stone was made;
And yet I felled him, | and stretched him before me.
What, Harbarth, didst thou the while?"

[13. This stanza, like the preceding one, is peculiarly chaotic in the manuscript, and has been variously emended.

14. *Hrungnir*: this giant rashly wagered his head that his horse, Gullfaxi, was swifter than Othin's Sleipnir. In the race, which Hrungnir lost, he managed to dash uninvited into the home of the gods, where he became very drunk. Thor ejected him, and accepted his challenge to a duel. Hrungnir, terrified, had a helper made for him in the form of a dummy giant nine miles high and three miles broad. Hrungnir himself had a three-horned heart of stone and a head of stone; his shield was of stone and his weapon was a grindstone. But Thjalfi, Thor's servant, told him the god would attack him out of the ground, wherefore Hrungnir laid down his shield and stood on it. The hammer Mjollnir shattered both the grindstone and Hrungnir's {footnote p. 127} head, but part of the grindstone knocked Thor down, and the giant fell with his foot on Thor's neck (cf. note on stanza 9). Meanwhile Thjalfi dispatched the dummy giant without trouble.]

{p. 127}

Harbarth spake:
16. "Five full winters | with Fjolvar was I,
And dwelt in the isle | that is Algrön called;

There could we fight, | and fell the slain,
Much could we seek, | and maids could master."

Thor spake:
17. "How won ye success with your women?"

Harbarth spake:
18. "Lively women we had, | if they wise for us were;
Wise were the women we had, | if they kind for us were;
For ropes of sand | they would seek to wind,
And the bottom to dig | from the deepest dale.
Wiser than all | in counsel I was,
And there I slept | by the sisters seven,
And joy full great | did I get from each.
What, Thor, didst thou the while?"

[16. *Fjolvar*: not elsewhere mentioned in the poems; perhaps the father of the "seven sisters" referred to in stanza 18. *Algrön*: "The All-Green": not mentioned elsewhere in the *Edda*.

17. Thor is always eager for stories of this sort; cf. stanzas 31 and 33.

19. Lines 1-2 are obscure, but apparently Harbarth means that the women were wise to give in to him cheerfully, resistance to his power being as impossible as (lines 3-4) making ropes of sand or digging the bottoms out of the valleys. Nothing further is known of these unlucky "seven sisters."]

{p. 128}

Thor spake:
19. "Thjazi I felled, | the giant fierce,
And I hurled the eyes | of Alvaldi's son
To the heavens hot above;
Of my deeds the mightiest | marks are these,
That all men since can see.
What, Harbarth, didst thou the while?"

Harbarth spoke:
20. "Much love-craft I wrought | with them who ride by night,
When I stole them by stealth from their husbands;
A giant hard | was Hlebarth, methinks:
His wand he gave me as gift,
And I stole his wits away."

[19. *Thjazi*: this giant, by a trick, secured possession of the goddess Ithun and her apples (cf. *Skirnismol*, 19, note), and carried her off into Jotunheim. Loki, through whose fault she had been betrayed, was sent after her by the gods. He went in Freyja's "hawk's-dress" (cf. *Thrymskvitha*, 3), turned Ithun into a nut, and flew back with her. Thjazi, in the shape of an eagle, gave chase. But the gods kindled a fire which burnt the eagle's wings, and then they killed him. Snorri's prose version does not attribute this feat particularly to Thor. Thjazi's daughter was Skathi, whom the gods permitted to marry Njorth as a

recompense for her father's death. *Alvaldi*: of him we know only that he was the father of Thjazi, Ithi and Gang, who divided his wealth, each taking a mouthful of gold. The name is variously spelled. It is not known which stars were called "Thjazi's Eyes." In the middle of line 4 begins the fragmentary version of the poem found in the Arnamagnæan Codex.

20. *Riders by night*: witches, who were supposed to ride on wolves in the dark. Nothing further is known of this adventure.]

{p. 129}

Thor spake:
21. "Thou didst repay good gifts with evil mind."

Harbarth spake:
22. "The oak must have | what it shaves from another;
In such things each for himself.
What, Thor, didst thou the while?"

Thor spake:
23. "Eastward I fared, | of the giants I felled
Their ill-working women | who went to the mountain;
And large were the giants' throng | if all were alive;
No men would there be | in Mithgarth more.
What, Harbarth, didst thou the while?"

Harbarth spake:
24. "In Valland I was, | and wars I raised,
Princes I angered, | and peace brought never;
The noble who fall | in the fight hath Othin,
And Thor hath the race of the thralls."

[22. *The oak, etc.*: this proverb is found elsewhere (*e.g.*, *Grettissaga*) in approximately the same words. its force is much like our "to the victor belong the spoils."

23. Thor killed no women of the giants' race on the "journey to the East" so fully described by Snorri, his great giant-killing adventure being the one narrated in the Thrymskvitha.

24. *Valland*: this mythical place ("Land of Slaughter") is elsewhere mentioned, but not further characterised; cf. prose introduction to *Völundarkvitha*, and *Helreith Brynhildar*, 2. On the bringing of slain heroes to Othin, cf. *Voluspo*, 31 and note, {footnote p. 130} and, for a somewhat different version, *Grimnismol*, 14. Nowhere else is it indicated that Thor has an asylum for dead peasants.]

{p. 130}

Thor spake:
25. "Unequal gifts | of men wouldst thou give to the gods,
If might too much thou shouldst have."

Harbarth spake:
26. "Thor has might enough, | but never a heart;
For cowardly fear | in a glove wast thou fain to crawl,
And there forgot thou wast Thor;
Afraid there thou wast, | thy fear was such,
To fart or sneeze | lest Fjalar should hear."

Thor spake:
27. "Thou womanish Harbarth, | to hell would I smite thee straight,
Could mine arm reach over the sound."

[26. The reference here is to one of the most familiar episodes in Thor's eastward journey. He and his companions came to a house in the forest, and went in to spend the night. Being disturbed by an earthquake and a terrific noise, they all crawled into a smaller room opening from the main one. In the morning, however, they discovered that the earthquake had been occasioned by the giant Skrymir's lying down near them, and the noise by his snoring. The house in which they had taken refuge was his glove, the smaller room being the thumb. Skrymir was in fact Utgartha-Loki himself. That he is in this stanza called Fjalar (the name occurs also in *Hovamol*, 14) is probably due to a confusion of the names by which Utgartha-Loki went. Loki taunts Thor with this adventure in *Lokasenna*, 60 and 62, line 3 of this stanza being perhaps interpolated from *Lokasenna*, 60, 4.]

{p. 131}

Harbarth spake:
28. "Wherefore reach over the sound, | since strife we have none?
What, Thor, didst thou do then?"

Thor spake:
29. "Eastward I was, | and the river I guarded well,
Where the sons of Svarang | sought me there;
Stones did they hurl; | small joy did they have of winning;
Before me there | to ask for peace did they fare.
What, Harbarth, didst thou the while?"

Harbarth spake:
30. "Eastward I was, | and spake with a certain one,
I played with the linen-white maid, | and met her by stealth;
I gladdened the gold-decked one, | and she granted me joy."

Thor spake:
31. "Full fair was thy woman-finding."

[29. *The river*: probably Ifing, which flows between the land of the gods and that of the giants; cf. *Vafthruthnismol*, 16. *Sons of Svarang*: presumably the giants; Svarang is not else where mentioned in the poems, nor is there any other account of Thor's defense of the passage.

30. Othin's adventures of this sort were too numerous to make it possible to identify this particular person. By *stealth*: so the *Arnamagnæan Codex*; *Regius*, followed by several editors, has "long meeting with her."]

{p. 132}

Harbarth spake:
32. "Thy help did I need then, Thor, | to hold the white maid fast."

Thor spake:
33. "Gladly, had I been there, | my help to thee had been given."

Harbarth spake:
34. "I might have trusted thee then, | didst thou not betray thy troth."

Thor spake:
35. "No heel-biter am I, in truth, | like an old leather shoe in spring."

Harbarth spoke:
36. "What, Thor, didst thou the while?"

Thor spake:
37. "In Hlesey the brides | of the Berserkers slew I;
Most evil they were, | and all they betrayed."

[35. Heel-biter: this effective parallel to our "back-biter" is not found elsewhere in Old Norse.

37. Hlesey: "the Island of the Sea-God" (Hler = Ægir), identified with the Danish island Läsö, in the Kattegat. It appears again, much out of place, in *Oddrunargratr*, 28. *Berserkers*: originally men who could turn themselves into bears, hence the name, "bear-shirts"; cf. the werewolf or loupgarou. Later the name was applied to men who at times became seized with a madness for bloodshed; cf. *Hyndluljoth*, 23 and note. The women here mentioned are obviously of the earlier type.]

{p. 133}

Harbarth spake:
38, "Shame didst thou win, | that women thou slewest, Thor."

Thor spake:
39. "She-wolves they were like, | and women but little;
My ship, which well | I had trimmed, did they shake;
With clubs of iron they threatened, | and Thjalfi they drove off.
What, Harbarth, didst thou the while?"

Harbarth spake:
40. "In the host I was | that hither fared,
The banners to raise, | and the spear to redden."

Thor spake:
41. "Wilt thou now say | that hatred thou soughtest to bring us?"

Harbarth spake:
42. "A ring for thy hand | shall make all right for thee,
As the judge decides | who sets us two at peace."

[39. *Thjalfi*: Thor's servant; cf. note on stanza 14.

40. To what expedition this refers is unknown, but apparently Othin speaks of himself as allied to the foes of the gods.

41. *Hatred*: so *Regius*; the other manuscript has, apparently, "sickness."

42. Just what Othin means, or why his words should so have enraged Thor, is not evident, though he may imply that Thor is open to bribery. Perhaps a passage has dropped out before stanza 43.]

{p. 134}

Thor spake:
43. "Where foundest thou | so foul and scornful a speech?
More foul a speech | I never before have heard."

Harbarth spake:
44. "I learned it from men, | the men so old,
Who dwell in the hills of home."

Thor spake:
45. "A name full good | to heaps of stones thou givest
When thou callest them hills of home."

Harbarth spake:
46. "Of such things speak I so."

Thor spake:
47. "Ill for thee comes | thy keenness of tongue,
If the water I choose to wade;
Louder, I ween, | than a wolf thou cryest,
If a blow of my hammer thou hast."

Harbarth spake:
48. "Sif has a lover at home, | and him shouldst thou meet;
More fitting it were | on him to put forth thy strength."

[44. Othin refers to the dead, from whom he seeks information through his magic power.

48. Sit: Thor's wife, the lover being presumably Loki; cf. Lokasenna, 54.]

{p. 135}

Thor spake:
49. "Thy tongue still makes thee say | what seems most ill to me,
Thou witless man! Thou liest, I ween."

Harbarth spake:
50. "Truth do I speak, | but slow on thy way thou art;
Far hadst thou gone | if now in the boat thou hadst fared."

Thor spake:
51. "Thou womanish Harbarth! | here hast thou held me too long."

Harbarth spake:
52. "I thought not ever | that Asathor would be hindered
By a ferryman thus from faring."

Thor spake:
53. "One counsel I bring thee now: | row hither thy boat;
No more of scoffing; | set Magni's father across."

Harbarth spake:
54. "From the sound go hence; | the passage thou hast not."

[52. *Asathor*: Thor goes by various names in the poems: *e.g.*, Vingthor, Vingnir, Hlorrithi. Asathor means "Thor of the Gods."

53. *Magni*: Thor's son; cf. stanza 9 and note.]

{p. 136}

Thor spake:
55. "The way now show me, since thou takest me not o'er the water."

Harbarth spake:
56. "To refuse it is little, to fare it is long;
A while to the stock, and a while to the stone;
Then the road to thy left, till Verland thou reachest;
And there shall Fjorgyn her son Thor find,
And the road of her children she shows him to Othin's realm."

Thor spake:
57. "May I come so far in a day?"

Harbarth spake:
58. "With toil and trouble perchance,
While the sun still shines, or so I think."

Thor spake:
59. "Short now shall be our speech, for thou speakest in mockery only;

[56. *Line 2*: the phrases mean simply "a long way"; cf. "over stock and stone." *Verland*: the "Land of Men" to which Thor must come from the land of the giants. The *Arnamagnæan Codex* has "Valland" (cf. stanza 24 and note), but this is obviously an error. *Fjorgyn*: a feminine form of the same name, which belongs to Othin (cf. Voluspo, 56 and note); here it evidently means Jorth (Earth), Thor's mother. *The road*: the rainbow bridge, Bifrost; cf. *Grimnismol*, 29 and note.

58. Line 2: so *Regius*; the other manuscript has "ere sunrise."]

{p. 137}

The passage thou gavest me not I shall pay thee if ever we meet."

Harbarth spake:
60. "Get hence where every evil thing shall have thee!"

[60. The *Arnamagnæan Codex* clearly indicates Harbarth as the speaker of this line, but *Regius* has no superscription, and begins the line with a small letter not preceded by a period, thereby assigning it to Thor.]

{p. 138}